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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000551

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR MOPS IS SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FREE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT LEADER MICHEL AOUN, SPEAKER BERRI REMAIN AT ODDS

REF: A. BEIRUT 550
 1B. BEIRUT 264
 1C. BEIRUT 251

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1. 4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) In two separate May 14 meetings, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) candidate Alain Aoun and senior advisor to Speaker Berri (Amal) Ali Hamdan confirmed that the public rift between FPM leader Michel Aoun and Speaker Berri was not resolved. Nevertheless, on May 14 FPM and Amal ministers voted together in cabinet against President Sleiman's proposal to nominate members of the Constitutional Court -- participating in the opposition's first use of the "blocking third" agreed on at the May 2008 Doha summit.

12. (C) Aoun predicted an opposition victory in Baabda, where he is running for a seat in the June 7 parliamentary elections. In Beirut II, Hamdan assessed that the March 14 Sunni candidate, Nouhad Mushnuq, might not win, even though the opposition would uphold the agreement made at Doha to lend him its support. Hamdan denied any serious political threat to Berri by the recent release of General Jamil Sayyed, a fellow Shia. He linked Israel's decision to release cluster bomb strike data to the recent capture of Israeli spy networks in Lebanon. End summary.

AOUN-BERRI RIFT:
TACTICS IN PLAY

13. (C) In two separate May 14 meetings, FPM candidate Alain Aoun and Ali Hamdan, senior advisor to Amal leader and Speaker Nabih Berri, told senior political LES that the public rift between FPM leader Michel Aoun and Speaker Berri was not resolved. Aoun opined that the dispute between Berri and Michel Aoun over March 8's candidate list in Jezzine was still tense. However, he did not believe Berri would attempt to torpedo Hizballah-FPM agreements in other districts due to Hizballah's complete control over Berri. He also believed Berri would side with Hizballah on practically all regional issues; however, he noted he would not be surprised after the elections to see Berri siding with Druze leader Walid

Jumblatt on some domestic issues such as administrative nominations.

¶4. (C) Hamdan also acknowledged tension between the two leaders, but said Berri would not attempt to influence the Shia voters in the district of Jezzine. However, he said March 14 supporters should vote for Berri's candidate to prevent Michel Aoun from winning all three seats in Jezzine. Defeating Michael Aoun's list in Jezzine was "important at the strategic level" for March 14, even if such a defeat meant victory for Berri, Hamdan emphasized. Hamdan assessed that although Berri is still a political foe of March 14, Berri is nevertheless "wiser and more flexible" than Michel Aoun. Hamdan also noted previous comments made to the press by Michel Aoun, in which the FPM leader said he would not announce his support for a new Speaker until June 8, a day after the parliamentary elections.

¶5. (C) Despite the rift, on May 14 both FPM and Amal ministers voted together in cabinet to block administrative appointments, including President Sleiman's nominations to the Constitutional Court. This was the first time the opposition used the "blocking third" agreed to at the May 2008 Doha summit.

AOUN ALSO AT
ODDS WITH SLEIMAN

¶6. (C) Aoun remarked that Michel Aoun was "infuriated" over President Sleiman's alleged interference in the elections in Jbeil, and publicly had called on Sleiman to clarify his

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position. According to Alain, the secret service contacted and encouraged residents to vote for the independent list of Nazem Khoury, Sleiman's former political advisor.

AOUN CONFIDENT IN BAABDA

¶7. (C) Alain Aoun, a candidate for the Maronite seat in the Baabda district, said he was working hard to obtain the Christian votes in the district of Baabda. (Note: Baabda, with two Shia seats, is a hotly contested six-seat district, Ref B. End note.) Aoun added he was not focused on campaigning in the predominantly Shia neighborhoods of Beirut's suburbs. He concluded that his Shia and Druze colleagues on the March 8 list were quite capable of obtaining as many votes as possible. Aoun predicted an opposition victory in Baabda, saying he also was confidently the overall situation was "favorable" for March 8, but hard work remained, he noted.

¶8. (C) Aoun called the second Hizballah candidate in the Baabda district, Bilal Farhat, "impressive," noting Farhat's medical degree and proficiency in several languages. Aoun mused Hizballah should use Farhat as a campaign asset by presenting him on local media and in campaign activities. Farhat could send a "positive image" to the Christian community about Hizballah in particular, and the Shia in general, he believed.

UNCERTAINTY OVER
BEIRUT II SUNNI SEAT

¶9. (C) On the Beirut II election (Ref C), Hamdan assessed that the March 14 Sunni candidate, Nouhad Mushnuq, might not win. He relayed there were strong sentiments against Mushnuq due to allegations he was an Israeli Mossad agent. (Note: The Doha agreement stipulated an equal division of the four seats in Beirut II district between March 14 and March 8. Saad Hariri feared the Shia would not uphold their commitment to vote for the March 14 candidate. End Note.) Hamdan confirmed that Berri informed Hariri he was still committed

to the agreement. According to Hamdan, Berri told Hariri he would kick off his campaign in the presence of Hariri's candidate as a strong indication of Berri's support.

GENERAL JAMIL SAYYED:
NO THREAT POLITICALLY

¶10. (C) Hamdan commented on implications of the recent release of General Jamil Sayyed, saying Berri undertook the necessary protocol by sending an Amal movement delegation to Sayyed's home. Hamdan remarked that Sayyed does not pose any serious political threat to Berri. (Note: Some observers had speculated that Sayyed, a fellow Shia, would pose a challenge to Berri's monopoly of the Speakership. Although technically, since he is not running for parliament, Sayyed is not eligible to be Speaker, they say Hizballah could withdraw a candidate later on and run a by-election to elect Sayyed instead. End Note.)

ISRAELI STRIKE DATA

¶11. (C) Hamdan described the May 13 meeting between Berri and UN Special Coordinator on Lebanon (UNSCOL), Michael Williams, as a "regular" one (Ref A). Hamdan disclosed that Williams briefed Berri on the cluster bomb strike data recently delivered by Israel to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Hamdan declared that the timing of the Israeli data release was a gesture only to placate the Lebanese after the recent uncovering of alleged Israeli spy networks in Lebanon.

SISON